

Superabundance of Blues?

A Quizzical review of William Coraxe's

'Plethora: Lost Verse, 1942/2002.' London, Oxford University Press, 2002.

The day after Professor George Stanwell died from rectal carcinoma, his secretary gave me a 45-rpm recording of Duke Ellington's *Mood Indigo*, together with the one surviving copy of William Coraxe's *Plethora*, and a set of instructions. Stanwell requested me to write - for publication - a 'sub-textual' review, that was to include 'no more than 150 words of quotations from these fragments', and then to 'destroy the book within 24 hours - without showing it to anyone, or making further record of its content.' The Ellington tune was a mutual jazz favourite.

Stanwell described Coraxe as a reclusive classicist, with five previous volumes of verse, hand-printed in limited editions, and privately circulated. Born 'about 1892' and incommunicado since the 1964 publication of *Finis: the Final Chapter* (which featured depressing images of old age, *Weltschmerz*, and suicidal fantasy) Coraxe was assumed dead - perhaps by his own hand.

His 'tentative obituary' appeared in 1984, in the book-review journal, *Literary Eye*, which Stanwell had founded, and which he both wrote and printed 'for limited circulation', using a 16th-century press. I have been unable to find any issues of *Literary Eye* anywhere except in Stanwell's personal library. Nor do I know of any private or institutional holdings of a single work by or about the enigmatic William Coraxe.

According to Stanwell, *Plethora* was unexpectedly 'released' by OUP on April 1, 2002; but, in accordance with the author's prior instructions, and before a single copy had been bought, it was withdrawn from sale and destroyed, except for one volume which was delivered to George Stanwell, 'as a memorial of lasting affection.'

Plethora was a limited edition, set in *Lucida* Blackletter, on rag-paper water-marked '1942' above a violet and the name *das Veisichen*. Each page was framed by Celtic designs of interlocked animals and plants, in rich colours: a predominance of cobalt blue, with trimmings of red and yellow, in a black framework.

The book comprised sixty original verses, perhaps for each of the years between 1942 and 2002, mostly fragments of apparently much longer poems. They were printed one to a page. The central four pages, between thirty and thirty-one, were unnumbered and, when opened, displayed a quote from a poem by the British geneticist, Haldane;

On the left:

'... now I am like two-faced Janus

and on the right:

The only God who sees his anus ...' - J.B.S.Haldane

Only three poems in the collection appeared to be complete; this assumption being based on the fact that they alone contained no elision marks. One of these, on page one, consisted of a single letter:

I

Another, on page sixty, read:

Colon:Rectum

The third, on page two, was the only one with a title:

Moon-Bird
The day-time moon
Matches the sky
Its face is blue
Its soul cloud gray
A fledgeling wings
Past scattered fleece
Where is it going
In its solitude?

Was there a cryptic message intended by this arrangement and content? I looked for a common theme in the remaining fragments, which were all four to six lines long. The following - taken at random - are representative, and complete the 150-word limit on permitted quotations:

... my love
Is a calico moon
On an indigo sea
And all too soon
It will drown
I know ...

... Great shaggy coats of bear and bison pelt;
Thick leather helmets, strong in iron lattice work,
Sinister with horns and martial drum
Of yellow bears' teeth on their domes;
Hands and faces blue with woad;
Black eyes full of mindless hate ...

... where lyrebirds called their falsehoods
To the water-colour skies
And sparkling streams projected into space
Their veils of misty elegance ...

... I am lapis lazuli
In alabaster deer
The eyes on wings of emperor gum
The serpent
Lurking in a Pharaoh's tomb;
I am the leopard's spots ...

The style and content of these fragments vary greatly. There is no discernible thread of plot in their sequence. The only themes I could find reflected commonly in any of them were Love, Death and the all-pervasive colour Blue, in myriad tones: Azure, Cobalt, Sky, Water, Woad, Cornflower, Indigo, Lapis lazuli, the watermark's 'Das Veilchen', and the scatological 'blue' humour of both the Haldane quote and the final pun.

But Coraxe and *Plethora*'s meanings remained a mystery. So I decided to concentrate on the colour 'blue', and to investigate Stanwell - his possible interest in Haldane and his apparent connection with Coraxe, the 'reclusive classicist', who offered him 'a memorial of lasting affection.'

Haldane, born in 1892, had taken a First in Classics at Oxford. Following a colostomy in 1964 he published *Cancer is a Funny Thing*, in *New Statesman*. He died nine months later.

Stanwell, like Haldane, also majored in Classics but had an academic career in biology. He was born on April Fool's Day, 1942 – 'and proud of the fact' - so that he turned sixty in 2002. He died on New Year's Day, 2003, thus undergoing (again like Haldane) a sort of gestation in reverse. His mother, a talented poet and water-colourist, died when he was seven. He often said that this 'fragmented and saddened' his life. Her name was Violet *Lucinda* Kirkaldy, and she claimed descent from Sir William Kirkaldy of Grange, a Scottish baron and double agent for France and England under the codename 'Coraxe'. As Lord Warden of Edinburgh Castle, he was hanged in 1573 for his support of Mary Queen of Scots. Stanwell was proud of his Celtic heritage.

These discoveries, though few, are too closely related to be coincidental or insignificant.

Perhaps Stanwell invented William Coraxe and five imaginary books of verse simply as a setting for the short-lived 'plethora' of pseudo-fragments - never part of complete poems - as a symbol of his lost maternal love and his fragmented life. He was a classicist and poet working out of his element in science.

Perhaps he even took his own life, and this was his way of telling the world.

Perhaps the truth will never be known.